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ABSTRACT

Although skilled social performance has been defined as a sequential, two-stage process involving both social cue discrimination plus skillful performance, investigators have de-emphasized cue discrimination in favor of skill performance. The relationship between cue discrimination and skill performance was investigated among undergraduates who were multimodally selected for skilled and unskilled social performance and assessed for ability to discriminate social cues. Results, averaged over three studies, found 82% of the socially skilled subjects classified as good social cue discriminators, compared to 49% of the socially unskilled subjects. Data lend support to the formulation of skilled social performance as a two-staged, coordinated sequence of good social cue discrimination followed by socially skilled behavior. Differentiation of the unskilled in social performance into good and poor social cue discriminators could have important implications for the assessment and treatment of social skills deficits. (Author/NRB)

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The Heterosocially Unskilled: All Can't Dance, Some Hear Music

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The Heterosocially Unskilled: All Can't Dance, but Some Hear Music

The most popular definitions of skillful social performance in the current literature are that of Libet and Lewinsohn (1973) and Hersen and Bellack (1977). Libet and Lewinsohn defined skillful social performance as the complex ability both to emit behaviors which are positively or negatively reinforced and not to emit behaviors which are punished or extinguished by others. Hersen and Bellack's conception of skillful social performance involved the coordinated delivery of appropriate verbal and non-verbal responses emitted by a person attuned to the reality of the social situation and aware of the liklihood of reinforcement for those behaviors. Both definitions reflect earlier formulations of skillful social performance such as that of Argyle and Kendon (1967), who viewed skillful social performance as an organized, coordinated activity that involved a chain of sensory, central, and motor mechanisms, very much in the same manner as a motor skill. That is, skilled social performance can be seen parsimoniously as a two-stage process, involving first the ability to perceive and interpret correctly the contingencies of the social environment, and secondly the ability to behave skillfully in ways that take advantage of those contingencies.

Despite the importance explicitly lent to social cue discrimination in the above formulations of skillful social performance, performance of skillful social behavior has been emphasized in social skills assessment and treatment to the detriment of good social cue discrimination (Peterson, Fischetti, Curran, and Arland, 1979). Few authors have attempted to support the sequential, two-stage process of skillful social performance implied in the most widely accepted formulations of skilled social performance in the literature. The fact that the timing and sequencing of social responses discriminates between undergraduate socially competent and incompetent men and women (Fischetti, Curran and Wessberg, 1977; Peterson, Fischetti, et al., 1979), while sheer frequency of social responses does not (Hersen and Bellack,1977), provides some indirect support to the notion that social cue discrimination may be as integral a part of skillful social performance as the skillful performance of the social behavior itself. The differences noted in the timing and sequencing of social responses in socially competent and incompetent undergraduates may very well be due to differences in perception of social cues.

The purpose of the present investigation was to provide direct support for the conception of skillful social performance as a sequential, two-stage process requiring both good

good cue discrimination and skilled behavior. It was reasoned that if skillful social performance is a coordinated chain of good cue discrimination followed by skillful social behavior, then skillful social performance would generally tend to preclude poor social cue discrimination, while unskillful social performance would not necessarily tend to preclude good cue discrimination.

Selection of undergraduate men and women as both skilled and unskilled in social performance involved a self-report measure of social anxiety (Rehm and Marston, 1968) and judges' ratings of social anxiety and social skill in a simulated dating interaction (Curran and Gilbert, 1975). Thus, selection was multimodal, with socially skilled subjects having rated themselves as unanxious as well as having appeared to judges as unanxious and skilled. Socially unskilled subjects rated themselves as anxious and appeared to judges as anxious and unskilled.

An operant paradigm for use in psychological assessment (Weiss, 1968) was used to determine the presence or absence of good social cue discrimination in the undergraduates selected for their skilled and unskilled social performance. Subjects were asked to view a videotape of an opposite-sex speaker and to press a switch any time they thought it efficacious to respond with a gesture or verbal response in

order to communicate understanding and rapport with the speaker. A reinforcing skill score was computed for each subject (Fischetti et al., 1977) which reflected the proportion of the subject's responses which fell in pre-designated, appropriate time intervals as determined by a separate criterion group selected for skillful social performance. When the number of subject responses falling in appropriate time intervals, adjusted for individual variation in total number of responses, exceeded chance ($p < .05$), the subject was considered a skillful reinforcer. Each subject had four opportunities to score as a skillful reinforcer (gestural and vocal responses to two, five-minute videotapes). Those subjects scoring as skillful reinforcers in two or more of the four opportunities to do so were classified as good social cue discriminators. Those subjects that failed to do so were classified as poor social cue discriminators.

In a series of three studies, two with undergraduate men and one with undergraduate women, 100%, 60% and 85%, respectively, of those subjects who classified as skilled in social performance also classified as good social cue discriminators. In the same three studies, 48%, 50% and 50%, respectively, of those subjects who classified as unskilled in social performance also classified as good social cue discriminators. Thus, in two of the three studies, the vast

majority of socially skilled subjects (men and women) were also good social cue discriminators while only half of the socilly unskilled achieved that distinction. In the remaining study (men), the proportion of socially skilled subjects classified as good cue discriminators was less than that of the other two studies, but in the predicted direction, while once again about half of the socially unskilled subjects classified as good cue discriminators. Averaged over all three studies, 82% of the socially skilled subjects classified as good social cue discriminators, while 49% of the socially unskilled subjects did so.

The above data, in general, tend to support the formulation of skilled social performance as a two-staged, coordinated sequence of good social cue discrimination followed by socially skilled behavior. While skillful social performance did generally tend to preclude poor social cue discrimination, unskilled social performance did not necessarily tend to preclude good cue discrimination. To use a musical analogy, the above data suggest that while the unskilled in social performance do not know how to dance, upwards of 50% of them can hear the music, while the other 50% cannot. Differentiation of the unskillful in social performance into good and poor social cue discriminators could have important implications for the assessment and treatment of social skills

deficits. While there is no empirical evidence as yet to support this position, it does seem reasonable to assume that the prognosis for treatment is different for cue sensitive and insensitive performance deficit individuals. It could be that among those who cannot dance, those that can hear the music have a better prognosis that those who cannot. If this assumption is so, the present emphasis in social skills assessment and treatment on social performance to the detriment of social cue discrimination has been a serious oversight warrenting correction.

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